The princes of India in the endgame of empire, 1917–1947

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Introduction

> Any account of the last days of princely rule will sound incredible today.
> K. M. Panikkar, 1977

When India's government-owned international airline was set up in the 1950s, one of the first things its directors had to do was choose a company logo – an arresting icon for its stationery and billboards. It is significant (though not without irony) that among the many resonant national symbols that must have leapt to mind, they hit upon – not a Bengal tiger, or a sacred cow or a *chakra* – but: the salaaming, *pugreed* figure of a king. This was the airline, the caption ran, 'that treats you like a maharaja'. Now the choice of a turbaned prince certainly made good business sense, the figure being a part of India's image abroad and thus easily recognisable to potential tourists. Beyond that, however, the choice reflected another, deeper reality: kings and kingship were, and are, a vital part of India's cultural baggage. In the modern nation-state which is the Republic of India, royalty, in the abstract, remains a rich and potent source of inspiration and political legitimacy.

Yet (and this is the ironical bit) maharajas – as such – no longer exist. Between 1947 and 1949 all 600-odd ruling princes in India were pensioned off and their ancestral domains – the so-called 'princely states' – were submerged in the body politic of the Indian union. Nowadays the few former rulers still alive are just ordinary citizens; while the ex-states survive – if at all – only in attenuated shape as components of larger administrative units. As a practical system of governance monarchy in India has been consigned to the dustbin of history.

By any standards 'integration' (as this process was rather euphemistically dubbed by its architects) represented a major watershed. It swelled the area of the new Indian state by over half a million square miles and its population by nearly 90 millions; redrew the political map of the subcontinent; and overthrew an entire governing order with roots going back to the *Mahabharata* and beyond. Of course there are those who would argue that the princes were ripe for a fall, and that their demise had been

long on the cards. But even if one accepts this hypothesis, and pushes the period of princely decline back one, two decades, the point still holds good: their fall was exceedingly rapid. At the end of World War I, the rulers were arguably at the peak of their power – safe under the military umbrella of a British raj imbued with the 'illusion of permanence', venerated by the overwhelming majority of their subjects, admired, even, by many nationalists. Thirty years later they were extinct. By comparison, the fall of the British aristocracy occupied at least a century.[1] No wonder many Indian historians have seen the 'integration' of the states as a 'great ... revolution'.[2]

This book is essentially the story of what happened to the Indian princes during those three decades of rapid – and finally fatal – political change. It seeks to discover both how they were undone, and why; and to determine what, if anything, the rulers could have done to avert the catastrophe which overtook the order in 1948. It is thus, primarily, a study in the diplomacy of the princely courts, or *darbars*, or, to put it another way, an essay in patrimonial politics; but it is also, at a secondary level, a study in imperial politics, for as time went by the *darbars* came more and more to dominate London's strategic thinking about the subcontinent – a trend which culminated in attempts in the 1930s to rope them into an all-India federation as a counterpoint to the electoral power of the Indian National Congress. As allies and clients of the British, the princes were significant players in that frenetic contest between the old world and the new which historians have called the end-game of empire. This is assuredly a grand and important theme; yet it remains a neglected one.

As the premier event in the history of decolonisation in Asia, the transfer of power in India has deservedly attracted much scholarly attention, particularly since the 1970s when the government archives for the period began to be opened. However the vast bulk of this research has focussed on the partition and the establishment of Pakistan, much of the remainder on the imperial debate over decolonisation; very little space has been given to the fate of the states.[3] Similarly, as against the vast aca-

[1] David Cannadine in his excellent study of the latter phenomenon nominates the 1880s as the decade when the 'rot' set in. *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New York, 1992), 25–32.

[2] R. C. Majumdar *et al.*, *Struggle For Freedom* (Bombay, 1969), 784. See also R. L. Handa, *History of Freedom Struggle in Princely States* (Delhi, 1968), 6; and William L. Richter, 'Princes in Indian Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6, 9 (27 Feb. 1971), 538.

[3] Nearly half a century after the event, the most comprehensive survey remains that by one of the principal protagonists, V. P. Menon. However while Menon's *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (Bombay, 1961) is remarkably detailed, it is seriously flawed by the author's determination to present himself in a good light.

demic literature that has been produced over the last few decades on 'British' India – that is to say, on the provinces – perhaps a score of books have engaged in a serious way with the history of the two-fifths of the subcontinent that remained outside British rule. And, of these, only three grapple substantially with the issues raised above: Steven Ashton's *British Policy Towards the Indian States*; Barbara Ramusack's *The Princes of India In the Twilight of Empire*; and the volume edited by Robin Jeffrey, *People, Princes and Paramount Power*.[4] How can we claim to have developed a sophisticated historiography of colonial South Asia when the dominant interpretations fail to take so much of the terrain into account?

Yet it is not quite true to say that the princes have been snubbed by history. Whilst they have not yet to any significant extent entered the domain of scholarly inquiry, they have been seized on eagerly by popular writers with an eye to profit. Still perhaps the best-known account of the princes is 'Diwan' Jarmani Dass' *Maharaja*, loosely based on the author's service in Kapurthala and Patiala states during the late 1930s. Packed full of juicy tidbits of royal scandal, real and invented, it has sold more than 100,000 copies.[5] Other examples of the genre are John Lord's *The Maharajas* and Larry Collins and Dominic Lapierre's *Freedom at Midnight*, which, unusually for books on the transfer of power, make the fall of the states a major theme.[6] In addition there is a considerable body of quasi-scholarly literature that sees the rulers as tyrannical despots and the states as unsavoury creations of British imperialism, medieval obstacles in the way of freedom and progress. According to Urmila Phadnis, the British 'upheld an outworn regime which would otherwise have collapsed on itself . . . [but which] compelled the people to lead a life of . . . stagnation, ignorance and apathy'.[7] Of the states in the 1920s S. K. P. Singh writes:

[4] S. R. Ashton, *British Policy Towards the Indian States, 1905–1939* (London, 1982); R. Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi, 1978); Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of Empire: Dissolution of a Patron-Client System, 1914–1939* (Colombus, OH., 1978).

[5] Diwan Jarmani Dass, *Maharaja; Lives and Loves of Indian Princes* (Bombay, 1969). Dass was eventually forced out of Patiala by a palace intrigue. Note by Sir Bertrand Glancy, 17 Nov. 1939, IOR R/1/1/3245. When *Maharaja* came out H. H. Harinder Singh of Kapurthala wrote to a friend: 'Yes, the book . . . is quite amusing . . . [but] Of course his ideas on money expendable in millions is completely wrong, because Kapurthala never had 10 lakhs together in their treasury.' Kapurthala to Sir Conrad Corfield 19 Jan. 1970, Corfield Coll., 3.

[6] John Lord, *The Maharajas* (London, 1971); Larry Collins and Dominic Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (London, 1975), especially chapter 7. For an earlier example of this genre, see Kanhayalal Gauba, *H.H., Or The Pathology Of Princes* (Lahore, 1945).

[7] Urmila Phadnis, *Towards the Integration of the Indian States, 1919–1947* (Bombay, 1968), 206.

They [the rulers] were ruthlessly suppressing the exposition of public opinion. Not a day passed without hearing the news of some Maharaja or other issuing *letters* [*sic*] *de cachet* to prohibit public meetings, summarily arresting . . . respectable citizens [and engaging in] wholesale arbitrary confiscation of property and banishment of people from their native land.[8]

The surface assumption here is that the princely states fell prey to an irresistable upsurge of popular outrage and vengeance. But beneath it lies another, which Singh articulates indirectly when he asserts at the end of his book that integration 'revived' the 'traditional unity of our country': namely, that the destruction of the monarchical system was in some mysterious way predestined by the laws of historical evolution.

Aside from the fact that these interpretations are, in many respects, contradictory (it is hard, for instance, to reconcile the characterisation of the maharajas as bejewelled loafers with the picture of them as unremitting despots – despotism presumably calling for at least some expenditure of effort) they are simply not supported by the evidence. To be sure, the princely order in the late colonial period had its share of 'bad' characters. Jey Singh of Alwar, who figures prominently in the early chapters of this narrative, was so orthodox in his religious beliefs that he refused to sit on leather and wore silk gloves lest his fingers inadvertently brushed against anything unclean; but his private life belied the saintly image he cultivated in public. He drank heavily (his flimsy excuse being that Scotch was not one of the substances specifically outlawed in the *Dharmasastras*). Although thrice married, his sexual preference was for young boys and he indulged it brazenly, surrounding himself with a retinue of 'good-looking young men' whom he fondled when fancy took him, even in the presence of guests,[9] and keeping on the payroll a servant whose sole job it was to procure him a steady stream of ball-boys from the local tennis club.[10] Last but not least, Alwar was cruel to the point of sadism. One story has it that when the maharaja became angry with the performance of one of his polo ponies, he poured kerosene over the poor beast and set it alight. Nor did his sadism stop with animals. Denied the son he wanted to secure the succession, he consigned his only daughter, Baijilal, to the care of a common prostitute and was apparently unmoved to learn, some time later, that she had contracted 'congenital syphilis'.[11] The classically

[8] S. K. P. Singh, *The Indian Ruling Princes and the National Movement* (New Delhi, 1991), 14–15.

[9] A ruler from a neighbouring state who went to Alwar for a visit in the 1930s was discomforted to find, when he retired for the night, a boy waiting compliantly in his bedroom. Charles Allen and Sharada Dwivedi, *Lives Of the Indian Princes* (London, 1984), 160.

[10] Note by Sir Bertrand Glancy, 31 Aug. 1935, IOR R/1/1/2652.

[11] Sir George Ogilvie, AGG Rajputana, to Sir Bertrand Glancy 15 Feb. 1934, IOR R/1/1/2546.

trained viceroy, Lord Willingdon, dubbed him a modern Caligula. It was no exaggeration. Another prince we shall meet again in these pages, Gulab Singh of Rewa, was, like Alwar, a paedophile, and in the end his passion for adolescent men would drive him to murder;[12] however, his greatest weakness was money and the beautiful things it could buy. Over twenty years Rewa systematically fleeced his state to the tune of at least £2 million. What he did not spend on himself and his palaces, he salted away abroad. Eventually deposed, he left behind him an empty treasury, a demoralised administration and a state lacking even the barest of essential services.[13] Yet a third hard case was Mahabat Rasulkhanji, nawab of Junagadh, who, like Rewa, begrudged spending money on social services for his subjects but thought nothing of squandering two lakhs of rupees on a party and a diamond collar for his favourite pet dog. Yes, the monarchical order was not lacking in depravity. Indeed, a handful of rulers – including Jey Singh toward the end of his life – were probably certifiably insane.

However, truly vicious rulers were rare. The vast majority of the thousand or so who occupied *gaddis* and *masnads* during the period covered by this book – roughly the first half of the twentieth century – were, by and large, a decent bunch. Certainly – as one would expect in such a big sample – most were casual rather than dedicated, plodding rather than brilliant; yet the best of them, who by dint of natural selection tended to provide the leadership for the order, were both intellectually able and hard-working. Hamidullah of Bhopal had a Master's degree from Aligarh University; Mayurdhwaj Sinhji of Dhrangadhra read philosophy at Oxford and later took out a diploma in social anthropology at the same institution. Syed Mohammad of Rampur surprised the American consul-general in Bombay with his assured grasp of 'the complexities of local and international political problems'.[14] As for conscientiousness, Laksman Sinhji, maharawal of Dungapur, thought nothing of spending 'five or six hours every day going through files and cases';[15] while the working day of the ruler of Cutch began summer and winter at 5 a.m. and continued, with a break for lunch, until mid-afternoon. Mayurdhwaj Sinhji spoke for them all when he recalled in conversation with Charles Allen: 'I wanted to be a good and popular ruler, moving in the direction of the ultimate ideal of Ram-Rajya, Rama's kingdom in which there was no injustice.'[16]

Moreover, when it came to politics and diplomacy, some of the nastiest

[12] For details, see below chapter 6.

[13] Col. Fisher, resdt. C.I., to Sir Kenneth Fitze 9 Jan. 1942, IOR R/1/1/3812; draft letter, Wavell to king [?] Mar. 1945, IOR R/1/1/4425; and note by G. K. S. Sharma, crown finance officer, 8 May 1946, IOR R/1/1/4245.

[14] Consul-general Bombay to sec. state Washington 15 July 1947, US State Dept. decimal file 845.00/7–1547. [15] Quoted in Allen and Dwivedi, *Lives*, 310. [16] *Ibid.*, 311.

rulers proved, paradoxically, the most capable. Jey Singh, perhaps the most immoral of the lot, was articulate, well-read and possessed of a sharp intelligence. A fellow ruler called him 'the cleverest and bravest man in India',[17] while secretary of state E. S. Montagu wrote of him as 'a man of imagination and of industry, of knowledge and of reasoning power'.[18] Likewise, there was grudging admiration among contemporaries for the keen political brain of Maharaja Gulab Singh of Rewa who, it might be added, could never have got away with his long reign of corporate crime if he had been the conventionally stupid prince of romantic fiction: 'a thoroughly wicked . . . clever man', was Lord Wavell's astute summation of him.[19] Of course, in the end both Alwar and Rewa were undone by their excesses. But in the interim both men made important contributions to the constitutional debate. The moral here – if we may use the term – is that in the world of politics there is no necessary correlation between ability and goodness.

Thirdly and lastly, the quality of government in a princely state did not hinge solely on the ability and inclination of the ruler. Contrary to popular opinion, the princes did not – could not – rule autocratically in the literal sense; the job was simply too big for any one person. Hence, in practice, it was the quality of the bureaucracy that really mattered – in particular, the calibre of the princes' ministers. And in this regard (because they could afford to hire the best)[20] the states were very well

[17] Entry in Yvonne Fitzroy's diary for 28 Mar. 1922, quoted in Iris Butler (ed.), *The Viceroy's Wife: Letters of Alice, Countess of Reading From India, 1921–5* (London, 1969), 71.

[18] E. S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary* (London, 1930), 293 (entry for 1 Mar. 1918). When Reading succeeded to the viceroyalty in 1921, the secretary of state took the trouble to 'commend' Alwar to him, explaining: 'I have come to the conclusion that his eccentricities and defects of character are all thoroughly worth while.' Montagu to Reading 9 Aug. 1921, Reading Coll., 3. Arthur Lothian, who got to know him better than most Englishmen, loathed him as a personality but conceded that he had 'probably the liveliest brain of all the Indian Princes'. Lothian, P. M. Alwar, to AGG Rajputana 19 Apr. 1933, Lothian Coll., 6.

[19] Draft letter from viceroy to king [?] Mar. 1946, IOR R/1/1/4425.

[20] As the princes' public relations man in London, L. F. Rushbrook-Williams earned Rs 2,500 per month; as chief minister of Patiala, Nawab Liaquat Hyat Khan got a monthly stipend of Rs 3000 plus an *inam* worth Rs 51,000 a year for life, and a grant of Rs 1,000 a month for his sons' education in England; as prime minister of Bikaner, Sir Manubhai Mehta drew Rs 5,000 a month, was exempted from customs duty on goods imported for his own use, and got free housing; as constitutional adviser and then chief minister of Travancore, Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer was paid Rs 6,000 per month but got much more under the counter through various corrupt transactions; by 1945 his total earnings were rumoured to be in the vicinity of 50 lakhs. Rushbrook-Williams to Bhopal 27 Mar. 1930, BRO, Bhopal, Chamber Branch, 22, c-4/9; note by Sir F. Wylie dated 7 Mar. 1941, IOR R/1/1/3660; *The Indian States Reformer*, 8 Feb. 1931; note, n.d., RSA, Bikaner, PM's Office, A 1281–1343 of 1935; memorial by C. N. Madhavan Pillai dated 10 Aug. 1945, encl. in vice-consul Madras to sec. state, Washington, 2 Sept. 1945, US State Dept. decimal file 845.00/10–343. It was indicative of the drawing power of these highly paid jobs that in the mid-1940s two very prominent politicians on opposite sides of the communal divide – H. S. Suhrawady and S. P. Mookherjee – considered pursuing a career in the states.

served. K. M. Panikkar, who worked in Patiala and Bikaner, was the first Indian ever to get a scholarship to Christ Church, only the second after Romesh Dutt to get an Oxford first. Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, dewan of Travancore, was thought to be (and not just by himself) 'one of the cleverest men in India'.[21] Of Sir Mirza Ismail, the chief minister successively of Mysore, Jaipur and Hyderabad, the American ambassador in New Delhi wrote effusively: 'I have not . . . met anyone else in India . . . either Indian or European, who is in his class.'[22] Now, it may well be that the employment of highly credentialled outsiders was not, in the long term, a good policy. As foreigners they were often unpopular with the people; and as mercenaries their primary loyalty was to their paymasters, not to any particular *desh*. Arguably, the rulers might have fared better in the denouement of 1947–8 if they had opted for less distinguished but more patriotic servants with roots in the region. Yet, in the short term, the strategy was quite an astute one. Having foreigners as dewans gave the princes a certain leverage over them. Also, it obviated their having to make difficult choices between competing elite communities: for example, Mirza at Mysore helped hold the balance between Brahmins and non-Brahmins; while V. T. Krishnamachari at Baroda was linked neither to the Marathas nor the Gujaratis. Besides, practically to the last,[23] they gave exemplary service. At home they kept the lid on dissent; abroad their forensic skills gave the states a significant diplomatic edge.

Still wearing the scars of their rapid fall from grace and power in 1947–8 – a fall precipitated, to a large extent, by the British crown's abandonment of its allies – the ex-princes feel that they have been betrayed all over again by History. Here is H. H. Mayurdhwaj Sinhji, former maharaja of Dhrangadhra:

> I refer you to the period 1942–48, and the transition at the end of it . . . I doubt if any [group] have had such 'a bad press' as they except perhaps the Jews in Germany! One has read so much misrepresentation of the terminal period that one cannot but subscribe to Henry Ford's apothegm that 'History is Bunk'! Accounts of events at which I was myself present have somehow blossomed

[21] Penderel Moon (ed.), *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (London, 1973), 241 (entry for 9 Apr. 1946).

[22] Ambassador to sec. state Washington 13 Jan. 1945, US State Dept. decimal file 845.00/1–1345. In Mirza's case, the hierarchy was reversed: it was the dewan who to all intents and purposes ruled Mysore. During the reign of Krisnarajendra Wodeyar, Mirza had absolute control over the administration. When his successor came to the throne in 1941 he found a situation in which, in effect, 'he was merely presented with a white sheet [of paper] with Sir Mirza Ismail's decisions typed upon it, and asked to sign'. Note of interview between viceroy and maharaja of Mysore 6 Mar. 1941, Mirza Ismail Papers, SF1.

[23] Towards the end, some dewans found it hard to reconcile their obligations to their princely masters with what they saw as a higher duty to their country. This point is addressed in chapter 7 and in the Conclusion.

without regard to fact, and these, whether willful or wishful, are now history. One feels an utter helplessness as if one had been an alien, an outsider. There is, perhaps, no gainsaying that had Ravana triumphed, we would have had a Ravanayana, extolling his virtues and execrating the Aryan aggressors.[24]

The language is emotional; but Dhrangadhra has a point. The maharajas *have* been maligned and marginalised by the historical profession to an absurd degree. It is time the record was put straight.

It goes without saying that this project is likely to raise the hackles of some scholars. For one thing it is about the most privileged of elites – not (at any rate directly) about the life of ordinary men and women. For another it is about high politics and – yes – events. However, any inhibitions I might have had on the score of historiographical fashion were soon erased as I got down to work and began to realise precisely what I had taken on.

First and foremost, there was the sheer scale of the task. As already remarked, the princely states numbered – if one counts all the non-jurisdictionary estates which abounded in Kathiawar and central India – around 600. And collectively they comprised a major slice of the pre-1947 Indian body politic – two-fifths of the area and one-third of the population of the erstwhile Indian Empire excluding Burma. Moreover, many of them were considerable countries in their own right. Kashmir, with an area of 84,000 square miles, was bigger than France; Travancore, with a population in 1921 of over 5 million, had more inhabitants than Portugal or Austria; from the pokey recesses of his Peshi Office, Nizam Osman Ali of Hyderabad presided over a kingdom whose income and expenditure in 1947–8 rivalled Belgium's and exceeded that of twenty member states of the United Nations. On the face of it, the project appeared to call for the re-constitution – in some form – of the modern political histories of several hundreds of separate principalities scattered across a large part of the subcontinent.

Secondly, this was not only a broad canvas: it was an uneven one. References to 'the states' or to 'princely India' suggest a landscape that was, in essential respects, homogenous. Yet, apart from the obvious fact that the states were all monarchies, there was precious little about them that was uniform. As noted above, the biggest ones were comparable to the countries of Europe; but the smallest ones could have fitted into some suburban back yards. Veja-no-ness in Kathiawar, for example, was less than an acre broad, and had a population, in 1921, of 184. Consequently the states' revenue collections, which determined what their *darbars* could

[24] H. H. of Dhrangadhra to Dr Hariprasad Shastri 23 Feb. 1983. (I am indebted to the maharaja of Dhrangadhra for this reference.)

Table Intro 1. *Taxation in selected Central Indian states, 1936 (In rupees, annas and paise) (per head)*

Prov./State	Average land tax	Average excise	Average customs rev.	Average rev.
Jaora	8-04-11	0-08-00	0-04-00	12-07-08
Dewas (J)	5-02-04	0-15-05	0-04-07	08-14-06
Nagod	1-13-09	0-02-00	0-02-00	03-06-08
Ajaigarh	4-01-03	0-02-01	0-00-05	04-15-03
Sitamau	3-04-07	0-06-01	0-02-00	06-05-09

Source: Memo by D. B. Tilak, 30 Jan. 1937, App. IV, Federal Papers, Nehru Library, New Delhi, 1.

spend on infrastructure and services, also varied enormously. Indeed as Table Intro 1. shows, taxation levels could be as much as 15 per cent higher or lower even in adjacent states.

Again, by the second decade of the twentieth century, when this narrative begins, some states, such as Gwalior, had already begun to modernise and industrialise. Visiting Gwalior in 1918, Montagu was shown over a bustling new 'industrial city on the site of the old town' complete with cotton and oil mills, a power station and an embryonic machine-tools plant.[25] The state also had sizeable holdings in textile factories and brick kilns in Bombay. Mysore, too, had started to develop rapidly on the strength of its gold deposits at Kolar, the largest in south Asia; while Bhavnagar and Cochin, two coastal states blessed with deep-water harbours, were well on the way to becoming commercial entrepôts. Others, though, remained much as they had been when they first came under British paramountcy. In the remoter parts of Rajputana and central India, female infanticide, *begar*, and agrestic slavery were still commonplace. After visiting Cutch in 1932, Lord Hastings wrote: 'If any European has been here before he hasn't left any traces.'[26] Likewise, while some rulers such as Sayaji Rao of Baroda and Krishnarajendra of Mysore had begun to experiment with new, westernised forms of governance (Mysore by the second decade of the century had a legislative council, a representative assembly, a public service board and a policy of recruitment by competitive examination) others such as the nizam remained firmly wedded to traditional notions of benevolent autocracy: 'This form of rule [Osman

[25] Montagu, *Diary*, 167 (entry for 3 Jan. 1918).
[26] Hastings to Sir Samuel Hoare 29 Feb. 1932, Templewood Coll., 14.

Ali told Lord Reading] suits the genius and temperament of my people and has resulted in peaceful progress and prosperity . . . My subjects are happy and contented and desire no change for they know that day and night I give my personal attention to their well-being.'[27] Yet it was not only ideology which divided the princes; it was also race, religion and upbringing. Proud of their impeccable *kshatriya* ancestry, the Rajput chiefs generally looked down on the *sudra*-descended Maratha princes such as Gwalior and Indore, and the equally plebian Jat-Sikh chiefs of the Punjab such as Patiala. For example, Umaid Singh of Jodhpur preferred to absent himself from the Armistice Day ceremony in London in 1918 – a grave breach of protocol – rather than incur the ignominity of being seated below Patiala. Conversely, Maratha rulers such as the Scindias of Gwalior nursed bitter memories of the Rajputs' role, as allies of the East India Company, in their downfall at the beginning of the nineteenth century;[28] whilst, in their turn, the Maratha states (Kolhapur especially) were held in low regard by their Brahmin-ruled former feudatories, the 'Southern Maratha Jagirs' of Bhor, Aundh, Akalkot, Kurunwad, Miraj and Jamkhandi. Needless to say the same reserve characterised relations between Muslim rulers like Khairpur and Bahawalpur and the mainly Hindu order at large. However even closely related dynasties were not immune from vendettas. As our story opens, Cutch was locked in a bitter dispute with Morvi about the ownership of a slice of the Rann; Dewas Senior with Kolhapur over the former's cruelty towards his wife, sister of the Kolhapur maharaja;[29] Patiala with his Sikh kinsman Nabha over the leadership of the *khalsa*.[30] When, during World War I, the idea of a representative council of princes was first floated, Tukoji Rao of Indore declared himself opposed. 'On account of the differences in the education, training, methods of thought, status and position of the Indian Princes', he averred to one of the scheme's sponsors, Sayaji Rao, 'it would be almost impossible to secure . . . unanimity . . . on any subject placed before the Council.'[31] The claim was exaggerated; yet the fact that it was made at all is indicative of the hurdles which stood in the way of joint

[27] Hyderabad to Lord Reading 7 July 1921, Reading Coll., 23.

[28] Sir Michael O'Dwyer, *India As I Knew It, 1885–1925* (London, 1925), 151; Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, *The Indian States and the Federation* (Cambridge, 1942), 9–10.

[29] This feud culminated in a bizarre midnight flight by the Rajkumar and his young wife by car to Indore, where he sought the protection of the AGG Central India. See E. M. Forster, *The Hill of Devi: Letters From Dewas State Senior* (London, 1953), 163–5; and *The Times of India*, 10 Jan. 1928.

[30] See Barbara N. Ramusack, 'Incident at Nabha: Interaction Between Indian States and British Indian Politics', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 28, 3 (1978), 563–77. E. S. Montagu described the two rulers accurately as 'enemies'. Sec. state to viceroy 27 Oct. 1921, Reading Coll. 10.

[31] Note encl. in Indore to Baroda 21 Oct. 1916, GSAB, Baroda, Pol. Dept., 341, 3.

action by the monarchical order; and which confront the scholar seeking to generalise, sensibly, about it.

Then, as if these complications were not enough, there was the problem posed by the undeniably exotic nature of the subject. At Rampur, guests were likely to be shown the nawab's collection of 200 radio sets, or entertained by his personal jazz band. The jam sahib of Nawanagar thought nothing of shooting a 1,000 brace of partridges in a season; while Ganga Singh of Bikaner and his two sons accounted for 3,300 sand-grouse in one outing in 1925. A large man with even larger appetites, Bhupinder Singh of Patiala was known to eat 25 quail at a sitting, and even on the day of his death managed to consume a 10-egg omelette. Pathologically shy, Nizam Osman Ali's favourite pastimes included taking nude photos of his European guests with hidden cameras, prowling graveyards at night and watching operations in the city hospital; although he still found time now and then to visit the *zenana*, where his 200 wives and concubines were said 'to cumulatively procreate at the rate of one offspring every four months'.[32] The more I read the more challenging the enterprise seemed. How was I to present a rounded account of these eccentric, larger-than-life figures without reducing them to orientalist caricatures?

In the event, fortunately, these conceptual hurdles proved less formidable than expected. For instance, it quickly became apparent that policy and strategy decisions about, and on behalf of the princely order were taken by a relatively small number of *darbars*: the larger, wealthier ones, who spoke from positions of inherent strength; the ones ruled over by lineages of especially exalted status, such as the Sisodias of Udaipur, highest in rank of the Rajput clans;[33] and ones whose voices carried weight by virtue of their ability to speak for a wider community, such as Patiala for the Sikhs: altogether, perhaps a score of states. In addition, a few others procured an influence over the councils of the order by virtue of the forensic skills and political nous of their princes and ministers, Bikaner being the classic example; and these latter tended to become more powerful over time as the order developed institutions to better articulate its opinions on all-India issues – the Chamber of Princes (COP) and the Committee of Ministers (COM). Indeed, with the advent of these bodies, the leadership of the princely order became, to a large degree, self-perpetuating, as office-holders gained in status, confidence and rhetorical power and acquired specialist knowledge not available to the rest of the order. Conversely, while the rank and file no doubt had opinions about

[32] Report by Louise Schaffner, US vice-consul, Madras, dated 16 May 1945, US State Dept. decimal file 845.00/8–1645.

[33] The dynasty was said to descend from Rama, the legendary god-king of Ayodhya.

most things, they tended to keep them to themselves and, when it came to taking a vote in the Chamber, to fall in, like the maharaja of Sirohi, with 'whatever the general body of Princes' – in effect the *darbari* oligarchy – decided.[34] In practice, therefore, the project resolved itself into a study – still wide-ranging but obviously much more manageable – of the interlocking political careers of some thirty *darbari* statesmen, preeminent among them Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, Maharaja Udaibhan Singh of Dholpur, Maharaja Dijvijaysinhji of Nawanagar, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, Sultana Jahan Begum and Nawab Hamidullah of Bhopal, Mirza Ismail, Panikkar, Sir Akbar Hydari of Hyderabad, Krishnamachari of Baroda, Sir Manubhai Mehta of Bikaner, Liaquat Hyet Khan of Patiala and Sir Kailash Haksar of Gwalior.

Similarly, while it cannot be denied that the states were a diverse collection of societies and their rulers a motley and not always harmonious group, the much-trumpeted notion of an overarching princely order is not entirely wrong. For all their squabbling, the princes had much in common as a class: affluence; privileges that put them above the common law of the land; the status of *khashatriyas*; autocratic power; bloodlines which connected them to gods and mythical heroes and which set them totally apart from ordinary folk. Moreover, while many of them would have had trouble identifying with the concept, everything about the princes' behaviour bespoke a highly developed class-consciousness – not least their custom of referring to each other in public as '*bhai*' (brother). Again, the dynastic elements which sometimes served to divide the order also helped to bind it together. Most princely houses had close kinship connections with at least half a dozen others. In addition some rulers, not linked by blood, developed binding personal friendships based on shared interests – as did Bhupinder Singh of Patiala and Udaibhan Singh of Dholpur, and Hamidullah Khan of Bhopal and Yeshwant Rao of Indore. Whilst generalisations about the princely order in India need to be made cautiously, they *can* be sustained.

As for the problem of stereotyping, I think it becomes less if one draws a distinction between public and private. Of course, the distinction cannot be rigid, if for no other reason than that what the princes did in their bedrooms and on the shooting-range (or were rumoured to do) was an integral part of their public image – a source, incongruously, for part of their charisma: yet, since we are not writing a collective biography of the rulers, this inner world can, with a few exceptions, be safely put to one side. The exceptions, occasions where those private 'excesses' became

[34] Maharaja of Sirohi to chancellor COP, 4 Feb. 1935, RSA, Sirohi, Sardar Office, 129 of 1934–5.

matters of public notoriety, and consequently of concern to the government, will be dealt with in their proper place in the narrative.

Which brings me, finally, to the question of method. While this book makes no claim to methodological originality, it does rest on a firm historiographical assumption, namely, that history should not be written backwards. Because the states are gone, it is widely assumed that they were always doomed to destruction by the forces of history; that their demise was inevitable. James Manor asserts categorically that 'by the mid-1930s, the princely order was doomed'.[35] Vanaja Rangaswami thinks that by the 1940s the maharajas were a 'spent force'.[36] Indeed, as noted earlier, there is a clear implication in some nationalistic accounts of the period that the states collapsed in the last resort *because they were monarchies*, an anachronistic form of government which was incapable of survival in the post-colonial era. Now, even on empirical grounds this argument can be contested: for, whereas the Indian princely states collapsed in 1947–8, the order they embodied – monarchy – is still alive and well elsewhere in the Middle East and Asia. For example, the continuing popularity and moral authority enjoyed by the monarchy in Thailand was a major factor in the resolution of the country's constitutional crises of 1957, 1973, 1981 and 1992. Likewise, in Malaysia, sultans very much like the erstwhile rulers of the Indian states and subject during the colonial period to similar forms of British overrule survived the transition to independent nationhood with many of their traditional powers intact; indeed, it was only in the late 1980s that a serious challenge began to be mounted against their right to block legislation and, in the king's case, to declare a state of national emergency. All this, of course, rather begs the question of why the Indian princes should have fared so poorly in the end-game of empire compared with dependent rulers elsewhere in the region. Beyond that, however, the 'inevitability' thesis reflects an alarmingly judgemental approach to the past based on a privileging of present day attitudes and concerns. Of course, it is a truism that all history writing is necessarily influenced by the writer's background; we are all, whether we like it or not, intellectually creatures of our own place and time. Nevertheless, there is a huge difference between suffering 'relativism' as an unwelcome but unavoidable constraint, and vigorously pursuing it as an end in itself – a strategy that can lead to the obscuring or marginalisation of those aspects of the past that do not fit with the writer's preconceptions, or that do not lie squarely on what John Tosh has called the 'assumed trajectory

[35] James Manor, 'The Demise of the Princely Order: a Reassessment', in R. Jeffrey (ed.), *People, Princes and Paramount Power: Society and Politics in the Indian Princely States* (Delhi, 1978), 306.

[36] Vanaja Rangaswami, *The Story of Integration: A New Interpretation* (Delhi, 1981), 246.